

What good are dads - key findings

The key points from the research published by Fathers Direct, NFPI, Working with Men and Newpin Fathers Support Centre on June 13 2001.

The main points of the research are listed below:

- Fathers are the main carers for children while mothers are working. In 36 per cent of dual earner families it is the father, more than any other individual, who cares for children while the mother is at work.
- Most men say they enjoy having close relationships with their children. Indeed fathers from a diversity of social and ethnic backgrounds usually say that fathering is the most important part of their lives.
- A parent's gender is far less important in affecting child development than broader qualities such as warmth and kindness.
- Fathers who have participated in baby-care courses take on more care of their babies than fathers who have not.
- Such fathers keep closer to their babies, engage in more face to face interaction with them, smile at, look at, and talk to them more.
- Men feel deeply moved by the experience of childbirth. Nine out of ten fathers attend the delivery of their babies these days. Not only is this a miraculous event, it also is remembered by many dads as a time when they feel an intense commitment which becomes lasting. Attending a birth can be a distressing and anxious time, particularly if there are complications or if dads do not understand some events. However, dads usually feel that it brings them closer to their partner and also to the child.
- Mothers report that fathers are their main source of emotional support after the birth. Mothers state that their ability to cope with a new baby is related to their partner's ability to do likewise. For example, one of the best predictors of a mothers' success at breast-feeding has been her perception of her partner's support.
- Men who feel positive about their work are especially able to cope with the demands of a new baby. In contrast men's experiences of work-related stress are magnified by a new addition to the family.
- There is no difference between men's and women's patterns of arousal in response to their newborn babies. Researchers have compared such things as increase of heart rate, blood pressure and skin conductance when men and women are confronted with a crying or smiling baby.
- Fathers are as sensitive and responsive to their young children as mothers are. For example when fathers feed their young babies they respond appropriately when the baby wants to pause or needs to splutter after taking too much milk. They also manage to get as much milk into the baby as mothers do.
- How fathers spend time with their young children is more important to the father-child relationship than how often they are with them. The amount of time that fathers are available to their children has not changed very much during the previous four decades but what has changed is men's use of such time to get actively involved in such things as playing with their young children, bathing, changing nappies and putting them to bed.
- Fathers and mothers give their babies the same amount of affection. Studies have also found that there is very little difference between mothers and fathers with respect to the amount of affection and responsiveness they show to their young children.

- Babies usually “bond” as easily with their fathers as with their mothers. Many studies have compared the ways in which 1-2 year olds relate to their “attachment” figures and have found that the closeness of father and baby is almost identical to that of mother and baby. This happens even when fathers have only a little contact with their babies each day due to long working hours.
- Some studies suggest that fathers help particularly in preparing the child for the outside world and developing “social skills”. In one major study preschoolers who had spent more time playing with their dads were found to be more sociable when they entered nursery school.
- Studies of fathers’ speech with their children have found that fathers use language that is as sensitive to their children’s level of understanding as mothers’ language. However dads are also likely to use terms that are inappropriate to the child’s understanding (such as “aggravating” and “brontosaurus”). Such complex language is thought to stretch children’s language development, making the father act as a “bridge” to the outside world.

In families where fathers offer kindness, care and warmth during the primary school years, their children are likely to do well at secondary school. The involvement of the father with the child at the age of 7 and 11 has been shown to predict the number of national examination passes at age 16.

- When fathers are involved with their children before the age of 11, they are more likely to escape having a criminal record by the age of 21.
- During adolescence the father’s role as provider takes on a new significance as children’s demands for material goods increase. Fathers of teenagers are especially aware of their children’s expectations of them as providers. Fathers who are unemployed or on low incomes may feel a sense of failure when they are unable to “come up with the goods”.
- Non-resident fathers often have a strong presence in their children’s lives. Just because a father does not live with his children it does not mean he is uninvolved with them. The research finds that 7 in 10 non-resident fathers have contact with their children.
- The more contact with the father the better adjusted their children tend to be. Most studies have shown that the children who fare best after divorce are those who see their fathers most often. However, a good father-child relationship usually reflects a harmonious relationship between the parents.
- Step fathers often become more involved in domestic life than biological fathers. This may be because parents in blended families realise the mistakes that were made first time round or it may be because they are older and have more time.
- Some fathers become “primary carers” i.e. they do more child-care than anyone else. Two groups of men have been identified as primary carers in a minority of households throughout the second half of the twentieth century:
In 10 per cent of families affected by divorce the father is the parent with whom the children live for most or all of the time.
- A small minority of fathers have the care of their children while their partners are at work.
- These fathers report that being with their children is the most fulfilling part of their lives. However these groups of fathers also find themselves a bit isolated from other parents (who are mostly mums).

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